

Westways

OCTOBER 1964 IN TWO PARTS: PART ONE



*Justinian
Caire*



*Albina
Caire*

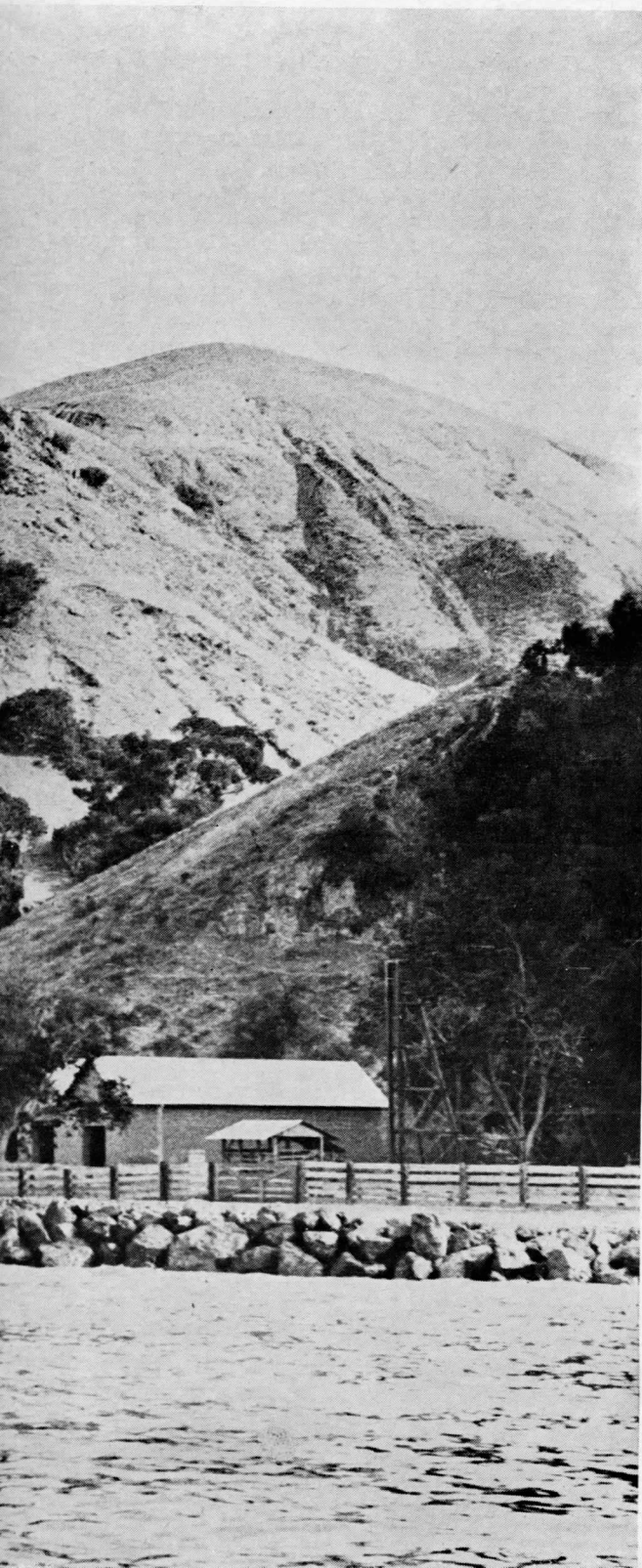


PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR



Slumbering Santa Cruz

By JoAnn Roe



SINCE the 1800's Santa Cruz Island, which lies in a windswept sea fifteen miles off Santa Barbara, has been the site of a vast stock-raising empire. Privately owned since 1839, Santa Cruz has remained largely unknown.

It has been at various times a haunt of pirates and gun-runners, smugglers of illegal Chinese immigrants and illicit merchandise. The very names of its bays excite the imagination—Smugglers Cove, Prisoners Harbor, Chinese Harbor, Diablo Anchorage and Coches Prietos. The Painted Cave on its northern shore rivals that of the famous grotto in Capri and may be entered by a fair-sized boat; others as spectacular are said to exist—although no one seems to know where.

Extensive Indian kitchen middens make Santa Cruz an archaeologist's paradise, but only limited findings are exhibited at the Santa Barbara Museum. The island's owners discourage visitors, but at Prisoners Harbor one may visit the ghost of an elegant French Alpine home, or see the sturdy winery and rotting fences and walls. Contrasting sharply is the well-kept pier where cattle boats load stock for market, and where sleek Navy craft discharge supplies for the small military garrison stationed high on the island.

What, then, is the real history of the island? What happened to the owner of the beautiful home now staring vacantly to sea from its shattered windows?

Prior to 1839 Santa Cruz—like all of the Channel Islands—was part of California under Mexican ownership, and its only inhabitants were a few Indians and sailors in search of sea otter or fresh meat and water. An abortive attempt was made to establish a prisoners' colony there in the 1800's. But in 1839 Santa Cruz became the property of Andrés Castillero, after the President of Mexico suggested that: "... regarding the services rendered by Castillero he deserves one of the islands such as he might select near where he ought to reside with the troops under his command."

Castillero placed some sheep on the island but soon turned it over to Barron and Forbes, an English trading company with offices in Mexico City. Barron apparently enjoyed his new acquisition as a vacation spot, and set out to make Santa Cruz a model rancho, stocking it with pedigreed horses, mules and cattle from Spain, and large numbers of sheep—Spanish merinos, merinos, and rambouillets. No expense was spared to develop the ranch, which had its headquarters in the long valley ending at Prisoners Bay that almost bisects the island (the site of the present-day ranch headquarters). Sheepherders were imported from the mainland to care for the sheep, and shearing time at Santa Cruz was a time of fiesta. *Barbareños* (Santa Barbarans) vied with each other for the shearing jobs, raising the cry of "*Vamos a Santa Cruz*," for Barron & Forbes paid top wages.

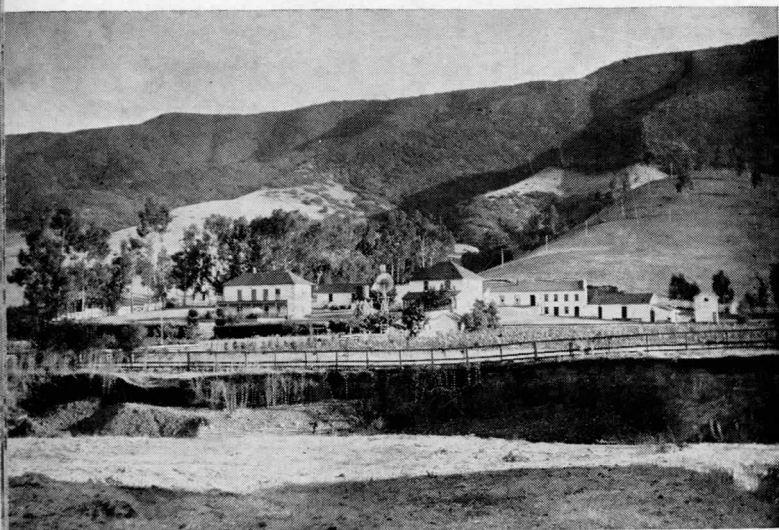
The Barrons, however, eventually tired of their island

The ghost of an elegant French Alpine home, once part of the estate of Justinian Caire, can still be seen at Prisoners Harbor

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE COLLECTION OF HELEN CAIRE



An old photo showing the once-extensive vineyards of Santa Cruz



The buildings of the main ranch as they appeared in the 1890's

enterprise and advertised it for sale. In the *Daily Alta California* of May 25, 1858, we find this advertisement:

"FOR SALE: An island containing about 60,000 acres of land, well watered and abounding in small valleys of the best pasturage for sheep. There are no wild animals on it that would interfere with livestock. There is a good harbor and safe anchorage. . . ."

No eager buyers appeared, however, and it was not until 1869 that the island was sold—to Justinian Caire and a group of nine directors from the French Savings Bank who had formed the Santa Cruz Island Company. Justinian Caire has been mentioned often in accounts of early California—usually depicted as a leader of about one hundred French from the Mediterranean who supposedly came to Santa Cruz to establish a model colony. This is entirely erroneous; Caire was a successful San Francisco businessman who bought the island entirely on speculation. Nevertheless, Caire's true story is equally romantic.

It was mid-winter of 1851 when the *Aurélié* docked at San Francisco, 152 days out of Le Havre, France. Striding purposefully ashore came tall, blonde Caire, born in the city of Briançon in the French Alps and trained to the mercantile business in Genoa. Caire watched anxiously the unloading of the cargo, for he planned to make his gold from selling merchandise to San Francisco's *nouveau riche*. He brought Sheffield plate, porcelain from France, dolls from Germany, hardware, and housewares. For the miners he had tools and equipment: in fact, his company continued to carry a line of mining supplies until the business was closed in the 1930's. To solve one major problem, that of fire losses in shantytown San Francisco, Caire built a deep pit under his store. When he heard fire bells clang, he shoved the merchandise into the pit and moved a massive slab into place. In 1854 he returned to Genoa to marry his fiancée, Albina, and brought her back to San Francisco. Caire's business prospered, and he expanded his activities. He became a founder of the French Hospital and a director of the French Savings Bank.

The venture to acquire Santa Cruz was somewhat ill-timed, it seems, as almost immediately the French Savings Bank became involved in financial problems. Caire, a man of high principles, managed to pay not only his own debts but often those of his fellow directors (at considerable strain on his finances). Subsequently, he acquired all of the stock in the Santa Cruz Island Company.

When Caire visited the island he was astounded at the similarity of the tranquil valleys and jagged mountains to his native French Alps, and planned a pleasant ranch site where his family might spend vacations. At Prisoners Harbor he built a charming, two-story French Alpine home and constructed stone walls, fences, and lanes throughout the main valley. The sunny, temperate hills were ideal for grape growing, and he planted extensive vineyards, imported a French wine-master, and made his own wine. Although in limited supply, the wines were considered among the very best; the Santa Cruz vineyards and those at the Paul Masson winery may have been derived from the same cuttings, for Caire and Lefranc, Masson's father-in-law and founder of the Masson winery, were good friends.

After the Caire children were grown, Caire and his wife more frequently visited their Santa Cruz home and, after Justinian's death in 1897, Mrs. Caire often stayed there for long periods. In 1937, 86 percent of the island was sold to Edwin L. Stanton and only 14 percent still remains in the hands of some of the Caire great-grandchildren—that portion near Smugglers Cove and Scorpion Anchorage. Far up the main valley lie the ranch buildings of the present cattle operation; while down at the bay the Caire home stands structurally intact, but its windows are vacant and the once-beautiful gardens are choked with weeds.

Except for infrequent visitors, the island of Santa Cruz slumbers today much as it did in the days of Barron and Forbes—inhabited chiefly by cattle, sheep and wild goats.